

Remarks at St. Muredach's Cathedral in Ballina, Ireland

April 14, 2023

Hello, hello. Hello! Mary, I see the light! Hello, Mayo!

It's great to be here with you all. And it's great to be back in Ballina during your 300th anniversary. This town is the home of Ireland's first female President, one of your youngest mayors, and maybe to be Ireland's first female astronaut—Norah Patten.

Mr. Mayor, thank you for welcoming me back to town.

And I also want to thank the Taoiseach for his remarkable hospitality, his generous remarks, and, maybe most importantly, for his friendship.

I want to thank the bands that played earlier: the Coronas—God, you guys are amazing; and the Academics. Let's give another big hand, by the way, to the Chieftains. I remember being with you back in 2016, and I'm grateful you came back for one more time to perform tonight. Thank you to the Chieftains. Your music is incredible, and I've been a longtime fan.

My good friend—my good friend, Enda Kenny, former Taoiseach, a Mayo man—is here with Fionnuala, his wife. God love her, she's going to go straight to Heaven. *[Laughter]* I love you both.

But most of all, I want to acknowledge my family, all the Blewitts. You make me proud. You make me proud.

All year, the words of the great Mayo poet, Antoine Ó Raifteiri, have been ringing in my head. And it goes like this. He said:

Now the Spring is coming . . .
I shall raise my sail.
Since it entered my head
I won't stay still
Until I shall stand . . . in
the center of County Mayo.

I mean it. I had to be here.

My son Hunter and my sister Valerie and I made several stops across Mayo today. We visited Knock Shrine, where I was hosted by Father Richard Gibbons.

And we also met out of the blue—we didn't know he was there—a former military chaplain, Father O'Grady, who gave my son the last rites in Walter Reed Medical Hospital in Washington. It was incredible to see him. It seemed like a sign.

We traveled up to the North Mayo Heritage Center, where I learned even more about my roots in Mayo, roots that led me back here to Ballina and to St. Muredach. What a magnificent cathedral.

I also learned, if you go far enough back, you can find the record of one Edward Blewitt, who worked for several years in the Ordnance Survey, mapping this entire area of Ireland.

But even before that, it turns out, he worked in the old Ballina brickyard. We found a record—or, I should say, the historical society found the record for me. In 1828, he was paid 21

pounds and 12 shillings to help supply the bricks for this cathedral—27,000 of them. I was able to hold one of them in my hand today. They're damn heavy—they're heavy. [Laughter]

As he labored, I'm sure Edward imagined that one day his family would worship here; that his children would be baptized here, like his son Patrick was; and that future generations of his family would mark the milestones of their lives here in these sturdy walls.

But I doubt he ever imagined that his great-great-great-grandson would return 200 years later as President of the United States of America. Isn't that amazing?

And I want to thank you—and I want to say thank you. I heard you all had an impromptu celebration the night I was declared the winner in the 2020 election. You decked out the town, I'm told, in red, white, and blue, with cars and crowds gathering in Market Square, singing "The Green and the Red of Mayo."

Well, I tell you what. It means the world to me. It meant the world to me and my entire family to be embraced as "Mayo Joe," son of Ballina. [Laughter] My mother, my grandmother, whose maiden name was Blewitt—they're smiling down on me right now.

And I can tell you what: That song speaks to me. It goes like: "Oh, the feeling [that came] over me to stay . . . forever more, forever more. Stay forever more. [And on] the Green and Red of Mayo, oh the Green and Red of Mayo, oh the Green and Red of Mayo."

The truth of it is, being here does feel—and I know it's going to seem—it feels like coming home. It really does. Over the years, stories of this place have become part of my soul, part of my family lore.

It was here where I imagine my great-great-great-grandfather took shade under yew trees after a long day at the brickyard. It was here how I imagined his children climbed the limestone cliffs and played in the muddy bogs and fished in the River Moy. It was here where I imagine one of those children—my great-great-grandfather Patrick—stood on the shores of Clew Bay and dreamt of becoming a seaman.

When Patrick was just a teenager, he set sail for America for the first time. But in the 1850s, as the famine hit Mayo particularly hard, he returned to Ballina to gather the entire Blewitt clan: mom, dad, and all the children. And together, they boarded the *Excelsior* to sail to the United States.

Just as I imagine their life here in County Mayo, I can only imagine how hard it must have been to leave it all behind, to leave the only place they ever called home, and to hold out hope on shores beyond.

Like so many other men and women of Mayo, Edward and Patrick carried this hope with them across the sea. They settled in my hometown of Scranton, Pennsylvania, in Ballina's sister city. As a matter of fact, I knew I was coming over. So you know what I did? I invited the mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania, to come with me. She's here tonight, Paige Cognito.

It was here—it was there in Scranton where Patrick raised his own son, also named Edward, Edward Francis Blewitt, my great-grandfather. His Irish pride ran deep. He helped found the Irish American Association, now known as the Sons of—Friendly Sons of St. Patrick of Lackawanna County. He chaired Scranton's St. Patrick's Day Parade in 1897 for the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

He became one of the first Irish Catholics ever elected to the Pennsylvania State Senate. And he became one of the first in my family to go to college, earning a degree in engineering from Lafayette College in Pennsylvania.

But while Edward had the head of a scientist, he had the heart of a poet. Years ago, after my mom died, a lot of her belongings were in my attic. I couldn't get myself to go through them, to empty the boxes. But when I finally did, do you know what I found in the attic among my mother's keepsakes? Over 100 poems written by Edward Blewitt—Senator Edward Blewitt.

In one from 1919, he wrote of "his Ireland":

From the fairest land, except my own,
'Neath stars and moon and sun,
a citadel of liberty,
My mother's land, Aroon.

It was in Scranton where my mom, Catherine Eugenia Finnegan, met and married my dad, Joseph R. Biden, Sr. He was a wonderful man, but his saving grace in the eyes of the Finnegan was he had a Hanafree from Galway as his mother's side. [*Laughter*] It rescued the fact, Biden's an English name. [*Laughter*]

Together, they raised me and my siblings with a fierce pride in our Irish ancestry, a pride that spoke to both the history that binds us, but more importantly, the values—the values—that unite us.

To this day, I can still remember hearing my dad say at the dinner table, "Joey"—and I mean this as a—I give you my word as a Biden; this is absolutely true. He'd say, "Joey, everyone—everyone—is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect." I can still hear my mom say, tell me, "Joey, nobody is better than you, but everybody is your equal."

These are the same values that I've tried to pass down to my children and grandchildren, whom I've always dreamed of bringing to Ireland. In 2016, when I was Vice President, that dream became a reality. Three generations of my family walked along Garden Street, where Edward Blewitt, the brickmaker and surveyor, lived with his family.

It was on Garden Street we learned the true meaning of the Celtic expression "a hundred thousand welcomes." Matter of fact, I think I shook a hundred thousand hands that day. [*Laughter*] I also met the extended cousins, who instantly felt like family I'd grown up with on Sunday dinners on every single week.

This strong bond brought me back in 2017 when I was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. No crowds, no motorcades, no Secret Service. Just me and my brother Jimmy coming home to see family. During the trip, I had the honor of turning the sod at Roscommon Hospice.

As many of you know, that hospice is now open. And thanks to my cousin Laurita Blewitt, and many of the—those—she's incredible, by the way—and many of those—there's a marker—there's a marker laid there in remembrance of my son.

Beau passed away in 2015, a decorated war hero from—attorney general to Delaware—after a valiant fight with brain cancer. So I can tell you how special it is that a place—a piece of his legacy lives here among his ancestors.

And thinking about it, I can hear my dad's voice again. He'd always say, "Joey, remember: Family is the beginning, the middle, and the end." Beginning, middle, and end. That's the Irish of it. The beginning, the middle, and end.

Everything between Ireland and America runs deep: our history, our heritage, our sorrows, our future, our friendship, our joys. But more than anything, hope is what beats in the hearts of all of our people.

For centuries, even during times of darkness and despair, hope has kept us marching forward toward a better future, one of greater liberty, greater dignity, and greater possibilities. In the earliest days of my nation's history, thousands of Scots-Irish, alongside George Washington, defended those ideals.

And then those democratic ideals were under threat during this—our—my nation's Civil War. That's when the Irish immigrants who came after the famine, more than 150,000 of them, joined the fight to defend the liberty and equality, many serving in the legendary "Irish Brigade."

When one other Irish Catholic President—only other one—John F. Kennedy, visited Ireland 60 years ago—and you can clap for him, man. He was something else. He presented your Parliament with the flag of the regiment of that Irish Brigade, honoring Ireland's great contributions to American freedom. It still hangs there to this day.

It's a legacy of faith and fidelity to freedom, to one another, that has been handed down generation to generation to generation. Today, the United States continues to honor that legacy, including that one of a Mayo-born marine named Patrick Gallagher.

Patrick immigrated to New York in 1962. He worked for the Senate campaign of one of my political heroes, Robert F. Kennedy. A few years later, when he wasn't even a U.S. citizen, Patrick joined the United States Marine Corps and deployed to Vietnam. In January [July; White House correction] of 1966, Patrick's team was attacked in an ambush.

When the enemy hurled a grenade at his team, Patrick threw himself on top of that grenade. He was willing to sacrifice his life to save his brothers in arms. He survived that attack today [that; White House correction] day, but was awarded the Navy Cross for his bravery. Sadly, he was later killed in action.

But this year, his name will be honored in iron as the United States launches a new Navy destroyer, the USS *Patrick Gallagher*, from Mayo.

You know, I've often said that we Irish are the only people who are actually nostalgic about the future. [Laughter] We always believe in a better tomorrow. It's because no matter what, we've always, always carried hope in our hearts.

It's hope that lifted the way through the darkness and lighted it for us. Our strength has helped us overcome everyday hardships. And above all, our courage has allowed us to march forward in faith, even in the face of sorrow and setbacks.

As we know all too well, this is not just the story of our past, but our present and our future as well. Earlier this week marked 25 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement—25 years of peace and progress—peace and progress not just for the people of Northern Ireland, but the people all across the island. It's a reminder of the importance of peace and of what you can accomplish when we work together in common cause.

Ladies and gentlemen, our world today stands at an inflection point where the decisions we make today are going to affect our futures for decades to come. And it's in these moments where we need hope and courage more than ever.

We're facing enormous challenges around the world, challenges that are too great for any one country to solve alone. Together, we must take on these challenges of disease, food insecurity, which continue to devastate communities around the world just as they did in Ireland generations ago. And I'm so proud to say that Ireland has not forgotten. You've stepped up as a leader to fight global hunger around the world today.

We must tackle the climate crisis that is—that has devastating impacts to preserve our planet for generations to come. As I said to the Parliament, Ireland's famous 40 shades of green now include green energy, green agriculture, and green jobs.

And with Russia's brutal aggression—brutal war of aggression shattering the peace in Ukraine and in Europe, we must renew our commitment to our values our ancestors fought for.

What do we Irish fight for? Freedom. Democracy. It always must be defended.

And I want to thank you. I mean this from the bottom of my heart. I want to thank you for your incredible generosity you've shown, like so many other Irish families across this country who have opened up their hearts and homes to tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees fleeing Russia's brutal violence. I've been there many times.

Ireland remembers. Ireland remembers.

So let me end where I began: with the bricks of this Cathedral. Nearly 200 years ago, the bricks touched by my great-great-great-grandfather and his hands still hold up this soaring nave and hold it aloft. Like the Irish American story itself, it's a testament to our shared past, present, and our future.

It speaks to the sweat of the workers who raised this spire up skyward, brick by brick, just as they did in communities all across my home country. You know, over 32 million Americans claim to be of Irish heritage. More would if they could. *[Laughter]*

And I imagine all the hope and hard work embodied in those Irish hearts inspired another one of my great-great-grandfather's—Edward Francis Blewitt's—poems. This one was from 1925, toward the end of his life.

He called it "The Workers." It goes like this:

The march of progress cannot cease—
while hearts and minds and ardent souls
are bound
in faith
to sublime things.

My friends, people of Mayo: This is a moment to recommit our hearts, our minds, our ardent souls to the march of progress; to lay the foundations, brick by brick by brick, for a better future for our kids and our grandkids, one of greater liberty, opportunity, and dignity, just like our ancestors did for us.

I have never been more optimistic, and I've been doing this a long time. I've never been more optimistic about what we can achieve if we stick together and stick to our values. This is a time of enormous possibilities. And united by history, heritage, and hope, and, maybe most of all, by courage, nothing is beyond our reach.

Every time I walked out of my Grandfather Finnegan's home in Scranton, Pennsylvania, he'd yell, "Joey, keep the faith." Then I'd hear someone from the house yell, "No, Joey, spread it."

May God protect all those who serve the cause of peace.

And, oh, one more thing: Mayo for Sam! Mayo for Sam!

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:53 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to former President Mary Robinson of Ireland; Mayor Mark Duffy of Ballina; Prime Minister Leo Varadkar of Ireland, who introduced the President; and Laurita Blewitt, board member, Mayo Roscommon Hospice and

Palliative Care Center in Knock, Ireland. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens and brother Francis W. Biden.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : St. Muredach's Cathedral in Ballina, Ireland.

Locations: Ballina, Ireland.

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